Stand up and be counted! Is your congregation Freethinker Friendly?

We are Freethinker Friendly: we provide a welcoming community for people with atheist, agnostic, humanist, and other non-theistic worldviews.

Unitarian Universalist congregations have been welcoming humanists, atheists, agnostics, and other freethinkers for over 100 years! Families, especially, find supportive and loving community and a village to help raise their children — often an oasis of acceptance in a culture that unjustly vilifies non-theists. For many, it's the only place they can be open about their beliefs and still share in the opportunity to express their love for humanity through service, and to engage with others through life's joys and challenges.

But our history and sometimes our "churchy" style hide that reality from many potential members. Now your congregation can extend a welcome publicly by applying to be designated a **Freethinker Friendly** congregation by the UU Humanist Association.

Just as being a Welcoming Congregation for LGBTQ people does not imply being unwelcoming to straight people, being Freethinker Friendly does not imply being unwelcoming to theists. The Humanist/Theist controversy remains settled with the understanding that UUs choose to respect, engage, and welcome all people.

What does my congregation need to do to be designated Freethinker Friendly?

The steps to become a Freethinker Friendly congregation are straightforward:

1. **Include language in your published welcome statement that includes atheists, agnostics, humanists, and other non-theists *explicitly*.** The wording is left up to your team but it needs to be explicit because *you* may understand, "We welcome all people...regardless of religious belief" to include those with no supernatural beliefs, but most of the population will not.
2. **Discuss, as a congregation, ways to be more inclusive and welcoming in your language and rituals.** There is no "word police" that will monitor for unqualified use of traditional religious language, but it is important to discuss how such non-inclusive language can be a huge barrier for non-theistic people to feel comfortable in your congregation. This can be just your board and leadership team, but ideally with feedback from all members. Also, especially for ministers, consider if you have any prejudices or stereotypes associated with non-theism, particularly if that request makes you feel defensive. (Even if you consider yourself a humanist, do you publicly vilify "fundamentalist atheists"?) For non-theists, do you

have prejudices and stereotypes of theists? Would any of your language make them feel disrespected? Challenging each other is an honored UU tradition, but if we claim to be a community of people of all religious views *and none*, do our "worship" services tell a different story? Do you require non-theistic visitors to "translate in their head" the words they hear or read even before they become aware of our tradition of using these words so liberally?

3. **Provide times and spaces that celebrate the humanist worldview, such as regular humanist services or a humanist local group.** Or, particularly for small congregations, provide opportunities for non-theists to connect in small groups for study or just socially. The UUA encourages all congregations to provide opportunities for "spiritual exploration", such as through the "Build Your Own Theology" course or through sponsoring local groups that focus on the different worldviews. Engagement with our diversity enriches our congregations! Shared principles are enough for some, but not for all. Feeling like you are amongst people who share your worldview, and that the rest value it, is the key to making non-theists feel and know that they belong.

4. **Reach out to the wider non-theistic community and let them know you exist and that you want to support them.** Invite members of the wider community to your events and visit other groups. Use them as a resource for shared interests and collaborate when you can, for instance by providing facilities at a reduced cost. Consider your congregation part in the wider movement of *communities beyond belief*. But be prepared to have to deal with occasional misunderstandings and anti-religious sentiments -- we need to engage in order to change attitudes. Consider affiliating with the American Humanist Association and connecting with your local Coalition of Reason.

When you've taken these four steps, your congregation then needs to fill out a brief form describing what you did, after which you'll be designated a Freethinker Friendly congregation.

What benefits are there to my congregation for being Freethinker Friendly?

1. **You can display the Freethinker Friendly logo and a statement of what it means on your website and literature to draw attention to your welcoming stance.**
2. **We will show your designation in our congregation / local group listing, making it easy for non-theists to find you.** We will also give you the option to have your congregation listed in the SecularDirectory.org and SecularConnect.org so that non-theists looking for a community will find you.
3. **You will please the humanists and other freethinkers who already are part of your community and make them feel welcome and valued.** Frankly this will help us stem the flow of non-theists who are leaving Unitarian Universalism.
4. **You will better serve the "nones", the huge and growing segment of the population, especially younger people, who have rejected traditional organized religion.** They are not all non-theists, but they have similar issues with "churchyness" while most still value community and service to justice.
5. **The UU Humanist Association will be promoting the program through the all types of media and drawing attention to the fact that UU congregations, including the Freethinker Friendly ones in particular, are great "habitats for humanism".** This will not only benefit your congregation, but the UUA as a movement.

Visit HUUmanists.org for more details about the Freethinker Friendly program.